

Rhythm Method

A Top-Down Funk Tutorial

BY ADAM LEVY

Funk is not an easily defined commodity. Sure, your handy-dandy dictionary may offer a few explanations for funk or funky: “having a musty smell,” “earthy and uncomplicated,” or “relating to music that has an earthy quality reminiscent of the blues.” But do these phrases get anywhere near the crux of the biscuit?

The two latter definitions certainly aren’t wrong, but that “earthy” quality needs to be coupled with a danceable beat to qualify as “funk.” Add “sensual” and “syncopated” to our definition, and we’re starting to get a little warmer—though maybe the dictionary would best serve its readers by just reproducing a photo of Nile Rodgers next to the f-word. ➤ ➤ ➤

Rhythm Method

When it comes to defining funk rhythms for the guitar, there are several schools of thought: Rodgers' slick chord moves, the salty grooves laid down by Funkadelic's many guitarists (including Tawl Ross and Phelps "Catfish" Collins), the skin-tight chanks of James Brown vet Jimmy

Nolen, and Prince's downright nasty strumming. And these days, funk is almost inescapable—it permeates rock (dig the Red Hot Chili Peppers), folk (check out Ani DiFranco), jazz (John Scofield), and jam bands (Galactic), and launches all sorts of hyphenated, hybrid musical strains.

So if you're looking to put a little funk in whatever style of music you play, we're here to throw down a few essential tips on funkification with a little help from Avi Bortnick, who has been working in San Francisco funk bands since the

genre's late-'70s heyday. Early last year, his profile was raised considerably when he began touring with John Scofield's band in support of the leader's groovacious *Bump* [Verve].

"Initially, I hired Avi to cover the rhythm parts I overdubbed on *Bump*," says Scofield, who has never before toured with a rhythm guitarist. "I wasn't looking for another soloist, but someone who *lives* in the rhythm guitar world. Avi does—he has that perfect, snapping groove with a relentless pulse, and he's *funky*. He also understands how

Ex. 1

♩ = 70-90 ♯ V ♯ V ♯ V ♯ V etc.

T
A
B

HEAVY HITTERS

With funk—as with any other style of music—one of the best ways to develop your craft is to transcribe things off records and figure out what your favorite players are up to. "Even without transcribing, *per se*," says Avi Bortnick, "it's important to listen to records that feature funky rhythm guitar.

That helps you internalize the sounds, the common voicings and riff vocabulary, the rhythmic feel, and so on."

So who should you listen to? That's a subjective question. "It's pointless to try to say who's 'the best,'" Bortnick offers. "There are so many great players and several different strains of funk." Still, you've got to start someplace, and Bortnick is happy to offer his personal "essential listening" recommendations:

• **NILE RODGERS** "Rodgers' flawless rhythm playing gave an immediately identifiable bounce to Chic hits of the 1970s and early '80s. Most well known is the hit 'Le Freak,' on which he employed triads, single-note lines, and double-stops. His feel and direct-to-the-board tone on 'Le Freak' are elusive—as evidenced by the difficulty most cover-band guitarists have at truly capturing the supreme groovaciousness of the original track."

• **AL MCKAY** "Earth, Wind & Fire's super-happening Al McKay helped set the standard for what guitar could mean for the groove of a tune. Check out how seamlessly his part locks with the percussion on 'Getaway' [from *Spiral*]. He was also masterful at creating dual-guitar funk grooves, as heard on the intro to 'Shining Star' [*That's the Way of the World*]."

• **TONY MAIDEN AND AL CINER** "With his deep-in-the-pocket rhythms, Tony Maiden had an inspired freedom and spirit in his playing. Check out his super-funky

single-note grooves on the intro and choruses of Rufus' 'Dance Wit Me' [from *Rufus Featuring Chaka Kahn*], and how he combines single-note lines and dominant-7th chords in the verses. Also outstanding is Maiden's work on 'Once You Get Started' [*Rufused*].

"Al Ciner was another excellent Rufus guitarist, who appeared on their first records. Standout tracks: 'Tell Me Something Good' and 'You Got the Love' [*Rags to Rufus*], which has a relentless groove featuring skanky, bent double-stops."

• **PRINCE** "'Lady Cab Driver' from 1999 is one track I like a lot—though *anytime* Prince plays rhythm, it's a glorious experience. He has also had some very funky guitarists in his bands over the years—including Wendy Melvoin, Miko, and Levi Seacer, Jr."

• **BO DIDDLEY** "You don't how *happening* the 'Bo Diddley Beat' is until you check out how the inventor himself played it on his recordings from the 1950s—when the groove was all goosed-up

with amp reverb and tremolo, and maracas shaking in the background. The Bo Diddley groove is the core of many funk grooves that came later."

• **ROGER TROUTMAN** "The leader of the great '70s and '80s funk band, Zapp, Troutman played skin-tight, high-voiced rhythm guitar on hits such as 'More Bounce to the Ounce' [*Zapp*]. Who needs an amp when a mixing board can sound so good?"

—AL

all of the parts of a band work together—that’s how he’s able to do his thing so right.”

Picking Points

Before digging into the nuts and bolts of funk guitar, let’s take a minute to look at picking-hand technique—specifically the way you hold the pick. Not that there’s any one “right” grip, but funk rhythm playing is a very different activity from lead playing, so it follows that a different sort of technique might be appropriate.

“For any funky sort of rhythm playing,” says Bortnick, “I hold the pick between my thumb and my index and middle fingers, and my wrist is a little closer to the floor than usual. This grip lets your wrist move more freely and with a wider range of motion than the common down-up picking position. You get a little more power and snap. Also, gripping the pick with two fingers helps me hold onto it while I’m playing rhythm—I strum pretty hard.”

So hard, in fact, that Bortnick installed Graph Tech String Saver saddles on his Strat to cut down on the inevitable string breakage. “I still break some strings,” he says, “but that comes with the territory. There’s a sound you get from hitting the strings that hard—the whole guitar *pops*, and that’s what you want. Also, when the

strings are being struck that hard, you really feel it in your fretting hand, and one big thing about rhythm playing—that I think most people don’t really get—is half of it comes from your *fretting* hand. That hand is not just forming the chords, it’s doing a lot of muting. Without muting, funk guitar just wouldn’t happen.”

Main Squeeze

Fretting-hand muting is an essential skill for funksters at any level. We’ll see how muting technique works in a musical context in some upcoming examples, but before we do, let’s get our muting muscles warmed up.

“I’ll often warm up with something like this [plays **Ex. 1**],” says Bortnick. “My picking hand is just going up and down in a sixteenth-note rhythm, and my other hand is squeezing a chord every sixteenth note. That helps develop the relationship between your fretting-hand thumb and fingers—that pressing on and off action. This isn’t the most musical exercise—you could do the same thing with triads or small chords, if you like, or even a simple Caribbean groove like this [plays **Ex. 2**], which features muted ‘scratches’ on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4.”

Getting Down to Business

Now that we’ve got the basic right- and left-hand techniques cooking, let’s put them to work in some real grooves. Check out **Ex. 3a**, a single-note line with a *D7* flavor. (As the line has no defining major 3 or minor 3, it could just as well serve as a *Dm7* phrase.) On its own, it’s just dandy, but we can flesh it out with scratches—voilà—in **Ex. 3b**.

“Deciding when to play it straight or when to add scratches,” says Bortnick, “is a question of what kind of vibe you’re going for at the moment, what’s going on around you, and how much drive you want to give the music. Do you want to take charge and drive the groove home, or just play a little part that fits in?”

Offering another example to illustrate the muting/scratching technique, Bortnick plays **Ex. 4a**—a two-bar cousin of **Ex. 3a** that fits hand-in-glove with *A7#9*. (Note the subtle variation between the two measures. Hint: Check out beat four in each bar.) Adds Bortnick: “In something like this [plays **Ex. 4b**], all the funk is in the fretting hand. If I played the same thing and left my hand off the neck, I’d just be strumming away, with four or five open strings going *jang-a-lang-a-lang-a*.”

Bo Knows Funk

“When you distill things down to the basics,” says Bortnick, “you find a *lot* of funk rhythms come out of the Afro-Cuban clave rhythm most of us know as the ‘Bo Diddley Beat.’ Check this elementary one-bar *Em7* rhythm pattern [plays **Ex. 5a**].”

Remember—even though **Ex. 5a**’s rhythm is somewhat sparse, your picking hand should be moving up and down at a sixteenth-note clip. This helps keep your groove rock-solid. Simply move your picking hand ever-so-slightly away from the strings when you don’t want them to sound. The upstroke and downstroke indica-

Ex. 2

♩ = 90-100 C G

Ex. 3a

♩ = 90-100 D7

Ex. 3b

♩ = 90-100 D7

Ex. 4a

♩ = 100 A7#9

tions should help clarify matters. As with Examples 3a and 4a, you can dress up Ex. 5a with scratches, as illustrated in **Ex. 5b**.

“You can take that basic phrase,” Bortnick says, “and move it over one sixteenth to get this cool variation [plays **Ex. 5c**]. And you can move it over another sixteenth—now an eighth later than Ex. 5a—to get this [plays **Ex. 5d**], and so on. Each variation is equally funky. Deciding which variation to use depends on how you want to interact with the bass line. You can accent the same beats, or play something that bounces *off* the bass line—something that fills in the holes, or ‘answers’ it.

“If you displace the start of our original phrase [Ex. 5a] far enough, eventually the two halves of the bar switch places, giving you this [plays **Ex. 5e**]—which feels pretty different. In Afro-Cuban circles, they’d call that a ‘2-3 clave’ because there are two attacks in the first half of the rhythm, and three in the second half. In contrast, our starting figure would be considered a ‘3-2 clave.’ Though funk is not nearly as codified as Afro-Cuban music, there is a lot of over-

lap, and the 3-2/2-3 concept is a neat distinction that can help you understand different types of funk rhythms.”

Modal Funk

“Dorian harmonies are very common in funk,” says Bortnick, “so they’re worth getting to know. Something like this [plays **Ex. 6a**] is a standard Dorian-based riff you might play over a *Bm7-E9* vamp. You could even superimpose this figure over a static *Bm7* vamp—or when you just have *E9*—to add some subtle harmonic movement.”

What makes it a Dorian progression? If we take the two chords involved—*Bm7* (*B-D-F#-A*) and *E9* (*E-G#-B-D-F#*)—and string together the tones of *both* chords, we get *B, D, E, F#, G#, A*. With just six degrees, that’s an incomplete scale, but it looks more like *B Dorian* (*B, C#, D, E, F#, G#, A*) than any other common *B*-minor scale or mode. (Note the relationship of the chords: *Im7-IV7*. Anytime you see a progression like this, it’s safe to assume Dorian.)

Ex. 6b offers several alternate voicing cou-

plings—all of which can be plugged into Ex. 6a’s rhythmic formula. The final voicing pair is actually a single chord form that can stand in for *Bm11* or *E9*. **Ex. 6c**—in the style of Prince’s “Kiss” riff—shows the voicing in action.

Hypno-Funk Fills

Now that our funk muscles are getting stronger, it’s time to stretch out into more adventurous rhythmic territory. **Ex. 7a** is a two-bar funk phrase based on *D7*, and incorporating *#9* and *#9* colors. “Even though the flavor of the chord changes as the top note moves,” says Bortnick, “I think of this as basically a one-chord vamp.” **Ex. 7b** is a greasy variation on Ex. 7a’s first bar, with a chordal slide on beat one.

Though funk rhythm guitar is more about rhythmic repetition than variety (the aim is to create a danceable, hypnotic groove—not to impress drummers with how many hip syncopations you can squeeze out of a chord), there’s usually *some* room for an occasional fill or turnaround at the end of a phrase. **Ex. 7c** shows how Ex. 7a could be tweaked to add a little harmonic

Ex. 4b

♩ = 100 A7#9

Ex. 5a

♩ = 80-90 Em7

Ex. 5b

♩ = 80-90 Em7

Ex. 5c

♩ = 80-90 Em7

Ex. 5d

♩ = 80-90 Em7

and rhythmic spice.

Examples 7d and 7e—either of which could supplant Ex. 7c's bar 4—offer even *more* options. “Both fills start with descending triads that I ‘borrowed’ from [keyboardist] Billy Preston’s signature riff on ‘Will It Go Round in Circles,’” admits Bortnick. Ex. 7d is the skankier of the two—with beats three and four suggesting something in the style of Rufus guitarist, Al Ciner. Ex. 7e is closer to Preston’s vibey original.

Funk to the Future

This cache of riffs should give you plenty of food for funk thought, and if you want to keep the disco ball rolling, here are a few final words of funk wisdom from our guide:

- “There’s a huge tonal difference between playing hard with your volume rolled back a little, or playing gently with your volume wide open. As I may play any given passage harder or softer for timbral reasons, I’m always adjusting my Strat’s volume knob to keep the overall volume about the same.”

- “Experiment with effects—including tried-and-true funk tools such as wah-wah, envelope filter (auto-wah), phaser, and delay. Each of these has *many* uses, from cliché to novel.”

- “You must have solid rhythm to play funk. One thing I’ve done to practice rhythm is to program a drum machine so that it randomly drops some beats. That helps you develop your internal clock—rather than having the metronome beating the time into your head.”

- “Play with musicians who have a solid, funky time feel—especially bassists and drummers.”

Ex. 5e

♩ = 80-90 Em7

Ex. 6a

♩ = 90-100 Bm7 E9

Ex. 6b

Bm7 E9 Bm11 E9 Bm7 E9 Bm7 E9 Bm7 E9 Bmadd11 E9

Ex. 6c

♩ = 100 E9

Ex. 7a

♩ = 90-100 D9 D7#9 D9 D7#9 D9

• “One mistake jazz players make when they play funk is that they *swing* the sixteenth notes. That can be cool when you’re doing it intentionally for a certain kind of groove, but make sure you’re conscious of the difference between swing sixteenths and straight sixteenths.”

• “Sometimes the little, sparse part can be nastier and funkier than the overt, full-on rhythm-machine thing.”

• “If you’re playing something that makes *you* want to move, then you’re probably doing it right.”

Ex. 7b

♩ = 90-100 C#7#9 D7#9

T 5 6 X X X X X 6 6 6 6 6 X X
A 4 5 X X X X X 5 5 5 5 5 X X
B 3 4 X X X X X 4 4 4 4 4 X X

Ex. 7c

♩ = 90-100 D9 D7#9 D9 D7#9 Eb7#9

T 5 6 X X X 6 X 6 X 6 6 6 6 X 5 X X X 6 X 6 6 X 6 6 6 6 6 7
A 4 5 X X X 4 X 4 5 4 4 4 4 X 4 X X 5 4 4 4 5 5 6
B 5 X X X 5 X 5 X 5 5 5 5 X 5 X X 5 X 5 5 5 5 6

D7#9 D9 D7#9 Dm13 D6/9 D7sus4

T 6 X X X 6 X X X 6 X X 6 X 5 X 7 8 10
A 5 X X X 5 X X X 5 X X 5 5 5 10
B 4 X X X 4 X X X 4 X X 4 4 4 9
5 X X X 5 X X X 5 X X 5 5 5 9

